

**Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)**  
**COVID-19's Effect on the March 2020 Advance Economic Indicator Report**

**Data Collection**

**Did the Census Bureau change its data collection procedures for the retail and wholesale surveys and the international trade in goods this month?**

*Retail and Wholesale:*

Yes. The Census Bureau utilizes a wide variety of collection methods for its surveys. Data, particularly from businesses, are collected on paper, online, fax, and through telephone interviews. Our National Processing Center (NPC) is responsible for mailing, faxing, data capture, responding to email messages, and handling inbound/outbound calls. Services offered by NPC have been limited to ensure employee safety. As a result, data collection is now occurring primarily via email requests and online reporting. Companies that have not responded may be contacted via an automated phone tree operation or by an analyst from our headquarters.

*International Trade:*

Yes. Certain import transactions that are typically filed via paper will be estimated. These paper transactions typically make up less than 0.1% of the total import value in a given month, and should not have a large impact on import statistics. Once the Census Bureau is able to process these transactions, the import statistics will be revised to include the actual data.

**How has the collection of the retail and wholesale data been affected?**

Many businesses are operating in a limited capacity or have ceased operations completely. As a result, their ability to provide accurate, timely information to Census may be limited.

For the March 2020 Advance Economic Indicators Report, processing and data quality were monitored throughout the month and quality metrics, including response rates, fell within normal ranges for both the retail and wholesale survey.

**Methodology**

**Were any estimates withheld or delayed because of data collection problems?**

No. All March estimates were released as scheduled.

**Did the Census Bureau modify its usual weighting or estimation methods used to produce monthly retail and wholesale estimates for March 2020?**

No. Standard weighting and estimation methods were used to produce all indicator estimates for March 2020.

**Has the reliability of the monthly retail and wholesale and the international trade in goods estimates changed?**

*Retail and Wholesale:*

No. The reliability of the retail and wholesale estimates as measured by the coefficient of variation for monthly totals and the standard error for month-to-month change has not changed substantially. For the published industries, reported data for March 2020 exhibited variation similar to that for prior months.

*International Trade:*

The changes are negligible. As detailed above in the data collection area for international trade in goods, there will be an estimation of the data that are typically filed via paper transactions. However, the impact of these estimates should be minimal on the overall import statistics.

## **Seasonal Adjustment**

### **Did the Census Bureau alter the procedures for developing seasonally adjusted estimates for monthly retail and wholesale data and international trade in goods?**

#### *Retail and Wholesale:*

Yes. An alteration was made in an option in the Census Bureau's X-13ARIMA-SEATS seasonal adjustment software (the "additive outlier adjustment" option) for the March 2020 data month for some kinds of business. This was done in effort to ensure that the published seasonally adjusted values fully include any immediate effects. These effects are not typical March effects and so should not be permitted to influence the seasonal factors for March and surrounding months. The altered option was applied to each kind of business whose March unadjusted value was found to be statistically untypical, as indicated by the appropriate t-statistic having a magnitude larger than a commonly used "critical value", and for which there were independent indications of an impact. Such indications confirm that a March survey value has an unusual potential to be untypical and justify the use of a standard critical value. In a usual month, every survey value is "blindly" tested, therefore a higher critical value is used, making it more difficult for the survey value to be classified as untypical.

#### *International Trade:*

No. An alteration was not made to our procedures for developing our seasonally adjusted estimates for international trade in goods. Seasonal adjustments are based on annual data and are projected for a full calendar year. These factors are produced with April statistics. When we complete our annual seasonal adjustment review in April of this year, it will only include data through December and does not include any of the months when Covid-19 impacted the statistics.

### **What was the impact of altering the seasonal adjustment option (additive outlier adjustment) for the March 2020 data month?**

The kinds of business that the alteration impacted may show a change in either direction from February. For these kinds of business, if the March values had been treated as typical, the program would have taken part of the change to be a seasonal effect and would have adjusted the data in a way that would have brought the adjusted percent change from February to March closer to zero. The altered option we used determined the changes in these kinds of business to be out of the ordinary. As a result, the February to March percent change in the adjusted value was left further from zero.

### **How was the survey value for a kind of business determined to be out of the ordinary?**

Each month, independent indications of how each kind of business performed are researched as part of our normal review of the estimates to detect reporting errors. This research includes, but is not restricted to, conversations with companies in our survey, a review of publicly available press releases from both companies and industry associations, and a review of other economic indicators.

This month, the March value of a kind of business was considered to be out of the ordinary if it was found to be statistically untypical (as indicated by the appropriate t-statistic having a magnitude larger than a “standard” critical value) and independent sources indicated an impact.

Source: U. S. Census Bureau  
Economic Indicators Division

Last Revised: April 28, 2020